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A Public Call for Secrecy

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WASHINGTON, Dec. 19 — The Reagan Administration's effort to impose tight secrecy on the next mission of the space shuttle reflects both an urge to protect national security interests and what some intelligence specialists see as a broader, long-term drive to curb the flow of information on such issues to the press and public.

News Analysis

Former Government officials support the Administration's assertions that this country has a legitimate need to keep Moscow in the dark about its satellite technology. But they quickly add that by making such a highly publicized shift to secrecy in the civilian space program, the Administration has evoked a foreseeable reaction and may have undermined its stated goal of denying Moscow information about a new generation of American intelligence satellites.

The Administration has drawn attention to the shuttle flight for Jan. 23, they say, thus alerting the Soviet Union to its importance, and in effect inviting closer scrutiny from the press and public.

Beyond that, the episode has touched off a political controversy over how far the Government needs to go in putting pressure on the press to protect security information without crimping policy debate on arms in space. This echoes earlier controversies over the Reagan Administration efforts to tighten up on policies and practices it inherited.

In early 1982, Caspar W. Weinberger, the Secretary of Defense, subjected more than a score of top Pentagon officials to polygraph, or lie-detector, tests to try to trace the source of one dispatch about the country's future military needs. After that, William P. Clark, then national security adviser, drafted a Presidential order requiring high officials to accept lifetime censorship of their public writings and disclosures, a move eventually blocked by Congress.

In the satellite case, Secretary Weinberger asserted that a Washington Post article today on the next shuttle mission represented the kind of disclosure that "can only give aid and comfort to the enemy." However, Congressional specialists replied that from previously published technical literature and from Congressional testimony, anyone else could have foreseen that the United Staates was preparing to launch new electronic intelligence satellites to monitor Soviet radio traffic.

"The Congressional intelligence committees have made not the least secret of the fact that we've provided funds for verification methods in space," said Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan of New York, former vice chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee. "The details are confidential and should be kept confidential. But I saw nothing in that article that you wouldn't just naturally know if you knew anything at all about this subject."

But Senator Patrick J. Leahy of Vermont, the new committee vice chairman, called The Post's article "damaging" to American interests and said that if its details were accurate the information would definitely be of value to the Soviet Union. Mr. Leahy said he was most concerned about who in the Administration gave away the information in the first place and that he would ask the Justice Department and the Defense Department to determine who was responsible.

Schlesinger Cites Precedent

What apparently produced a severe jolt in political Washington, several former high officials suggested, was the Government's abrupt effort to impose secrecy on the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, founded two decades ago as a civilian agency dedicated to open, peaceful missions in space.

James R. Schlesinger, a former Defense Secretary and Director of Central Intelligence, said that the Air Force and Central Intelligence Agency had managed to launch military and intelligence satellites through the years in relative secrecy by establishing a pattern of operation that won public and press acceptance. But in this case, he observed, the Administration dramatically changed both the routine and the nature of the civilian space agency.

"If the Defense Department wanted to keep this particular mission classified, it chose the worst possible approach," Mr. Schlesinger said. "By throwing the spotlight on this mission, it produced an enticement for people to go after what the mission was about and then to publish what they found out.

"If the objective was re-establishing the capability of the Air Force in the long run to have a classified satellite launch, that's undertstandable. But if the objective was to keep this particular mission classified, it was almost inevitable that something would leak. Breaking the routine of the shuttle flights and the NASA tradition of 20 years was bound to call attention to this mission."

Another intelligence specialist, speaking on condition of not being identified, said that by holding a news conference on Monday to announce the new policy and then publicizing Mr. Weinberger's efforts to prod the press into cooperating, the Administration had also put the Soviet Union on notice that it had important missions coming up.

Defending the legitimacy of tight security on the military functions and detailed operation of satellites, intelligence specialists point to history. One specialist said that the American KH-11 photo reconnaissance satellite operated in the mid-1970's for a year without Soviet detection until a Pentagon clerk sold Soviet agents a manual.

Until that security breach, this specialist said, the Soviet Union was unable to develop countermeasures to balk the intelligence-gathering capacity of the KH-11. He added that for six months more, Moscow was unaware that the United States had a second satellite like it in orbit, meaning that for at least six months more, it operated without being disrupted.

But this same specialist saw little justification in the Administration's announced intention to keep the time of launching secret for the Jan. 23 mission, because the preparations for such space shuttle launches at Cape Canaveral are visible to anyone on the highways and beaches in the region.

Defense Department officials today indicated that the anger in the Pentagon toward The Washington Post was more over its defiance of Mr. Weinberger's appeals not to publish information on the mission than over any specific security breach.

"My impression is that it has to do more with procedures," said Fred C. Iklé, Under Secretary of Defense for policy. "The Secretary of Defense talked to a number of the networks, not to go with some stories, and they complied. Then The Washington Post has a story. It undermines a process which was accepted by editors and publishers that abstain from printing."

Speculation on Invoking Fight

Mr. Iklé has been one of the Administration's most vigorous advocates of tighter legal restrictions. At a conference at Princeton University on Dec. 1, he told reporters, Government officials and academics that the Administration was likely to seek legislation to in-

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crease penalties against officials who disclosed security information to the press.

"The laws are not adequate," he asserted. "We have decided to fight it on all fronts."

Some knowledgeable intelligence specialists said that the Pentagon might have anticipated and welcomed a political clash with the press on the shuttle issue, confident of public support because of President Reagan's overwhelming re-election and polls indicating public displeasure with the press.

One suggested that after many internal battles over the Pentagon budget, Mr. Weinberger might have calculated that a clash with some press institutions might make him a rallying point in the Administration and for the President personally. If controversy leads to Congressional efforts to make the Air Force less dependent on the space shuttle program for launching its satellites, some suggested this would strengthen the Air Force hand in the battle for mney and authority for its own satellite launching program.

But a more common reaction was that Mr. Weinberger's vehemence reflected both the Administration's general conviction that more controls are needed and its reversal of the policy of greater openness established under the Carter Administration. Mr. Carter had issued orders to try to reduce the amount of secret material and to make more of it public, but Mr. Reagan has issued orders seeking to tighten controls and insure that more, not less information, is kept secret.